

Sleep

All parents deal with children who have difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep, these sleep difficulties are quite normal. However, children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) appear to have more ongoing sleep-related difficulties. The number of families affected can vary, but significant sleep problems can occur in 40%-80% of children with ASD.

Sleep is a critical component of health. Although we do not understand all its functions, sleep is essential for growth, to restore our body and immune system and to support memory and learning.

For children with ASD, insufficient sleep appears to impact daytime behaviours, making challenging behaviours worse. Furthermore, sleep difficulties can impact on parents and siblings, adding to the stress and challenges of parenting a child who has autism. No one can function at their best when they are sleep deprived

What causes sleep difficulties in Children with Autism?

The most common reason for sleep difficulties in all children are environmental factors or inadvertent behaviour shaping. For example, parents may assist a child in falling asleep by rocking or holding them and placing them in bed while asleep. But when the child wakes later that night and no longer has those factors they are unable to get back to sleep by themselves. Another common cause of sleep difficulties is putting a child to sleep in a bedroom where he/she engages in stimulating play activities during the day.

Studies suggest children with ASD are more likely to have abnormal melatonin regulation. Melatonin is a

hormone that regulates the wake/sleep cycle. In addition, children with autism may be more anxious about bedtime routine and may have difficulty with the social cues that signal bedtime. They are also more sensitive to sensory experiences such as light, touch or sound.

What to do?

Sleep Diary: One of the most important steps parents can take is to keep a sleep diary, keeping track of time of sleep and number of night-time awakenings. A sleep diary allows families to become aware of patterns and environmental situations that may be inadvertently contributing to sleep problems and to monitor progress. These will be required prior to professional support – such as Sleep Right.

Establish a routine: Children with autism respond well to routines because they allow them to feel safe and in control. Create a routine that you can use every day and anywhere. It can be helpful to create a visual schedule to inform and reassure them of the expected steps in a bedtime routine. A new routine can take time to get used to, therefore reinforce small steps in a positive way.

Prior to bedtime: Consider the activities prior to bedtime and their effect on calming or stimulating children. It is recommended that children do not experience blue light from the TV or laptop/tablets at least 1-2 hours prior to sleep.

- Bath time – warmth of the bath aids the production of melatonin, which is a hormone which aids sleep
- If bath time excites your child or makes them anxious then give them a bath in the morning

- Wrap your child in a towel or bath robe this will help produce melatonin
- DO NOT bring your child downstairs after the bed-time routine has started
- Complete fine finger activities such as jigsaw, lego, threading

Using relaxation techniques: Children with autism may feel particularly anxious around bedtime and not be able to express their need to unwind. Relaxations techniques can be helpful.

Consider changes to food and drink: Eliminate caffeinated drinks close to bedtime as this might disturb their sleep. Some children with ASD have gastrointestinal problems, so they may experience discomfort during or after eating, such as wind or constipation, which might disturb their sleep, therefore sometimes keeping a food diary can help eliminate problem foods.

Make sleep more comfortable: Your child might find being in bed uncomfortable. Some children are sensitive to light, sounds, smells and touch. Therefore, some of these ideas may help:

- Block out light using dark curtains or black-out blinds
- Remove labels from bedding and night clothes
- Use a weighed blanket – this can be calming to children with autism by allowing them to better feel their movements and understand where their bodies are in space – discuss with an Occupational Therapist for further advice.
- Remove distractions, such as toys on the bed and pictures on the wall (unless your child finds these relaxing), consider a different colour on the walls.

Explain sleep: Children can have difficulty understanding the need for sleep. A social story could be used to explain this.

What does it mean when people say, "Time to go to bed" – Carol Gray

All people sleep. Most people sleep on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. They wake up each morning. I sleep in a bed. Usually Mum or Dad says, "Time to go to bed". This means it is time to get into bed and go to sleep.

Strategies to support common problems:

Gradual withdrawal: Children who insist on parent's presence:

1. Sit on the bed with your child, giving NO eye contact, and no verbal discussion. Once the child is asleep quietly leave the room
2. After 2-3 nights try sitting on the floor/chair next to the bed, once your child is asleep leave the room
3. Each night following this slowly move towards the door
4. Once you have reached the door, sit on the other side of the door and pop your head into the room but without maintaining eye contact.

Night waking:

1. Go into the room when they awake, reassure your child, tuck them in
2. Use a firm approach and no communication, leave the room even if not fully settled
3. Leave them for 5 minutes and if they are crying then repeat process until they settle.

4. Your child should learn after 4-5 nights that they are not going to be taken out of their bed/cot and will stay in their room

For night waking: Possible nightmares

1. From sleep diary see when child wakes up during the night
2. Set alarm clock 30 minutes before this
3. Wake child slightly and allow to fall back to sleep
4. If child doesn't fall back to sleep, try waking 45 minutes before on the next night and experiment until you find the best time

Remember:

- Remain consistent
- Set small targets
- Support each other
- Stick to the technique for 2 weeks

Summary:

None of these suggestions can be guaranteed to work in themselves; you may find that a combination of them proves most effective.

Close examination of your child's sleep diaries is likely to give you the greatest insight into what is causing your child's problem and which solution is most likely to work.

When implementing these strategies, the problem may get worse before it improves. However, it is important to remain consistent in your approach.

Rewarding and praise following a better night's sleep will help to positively reinforce it.



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Sleep Problems



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